THE WORLDS OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

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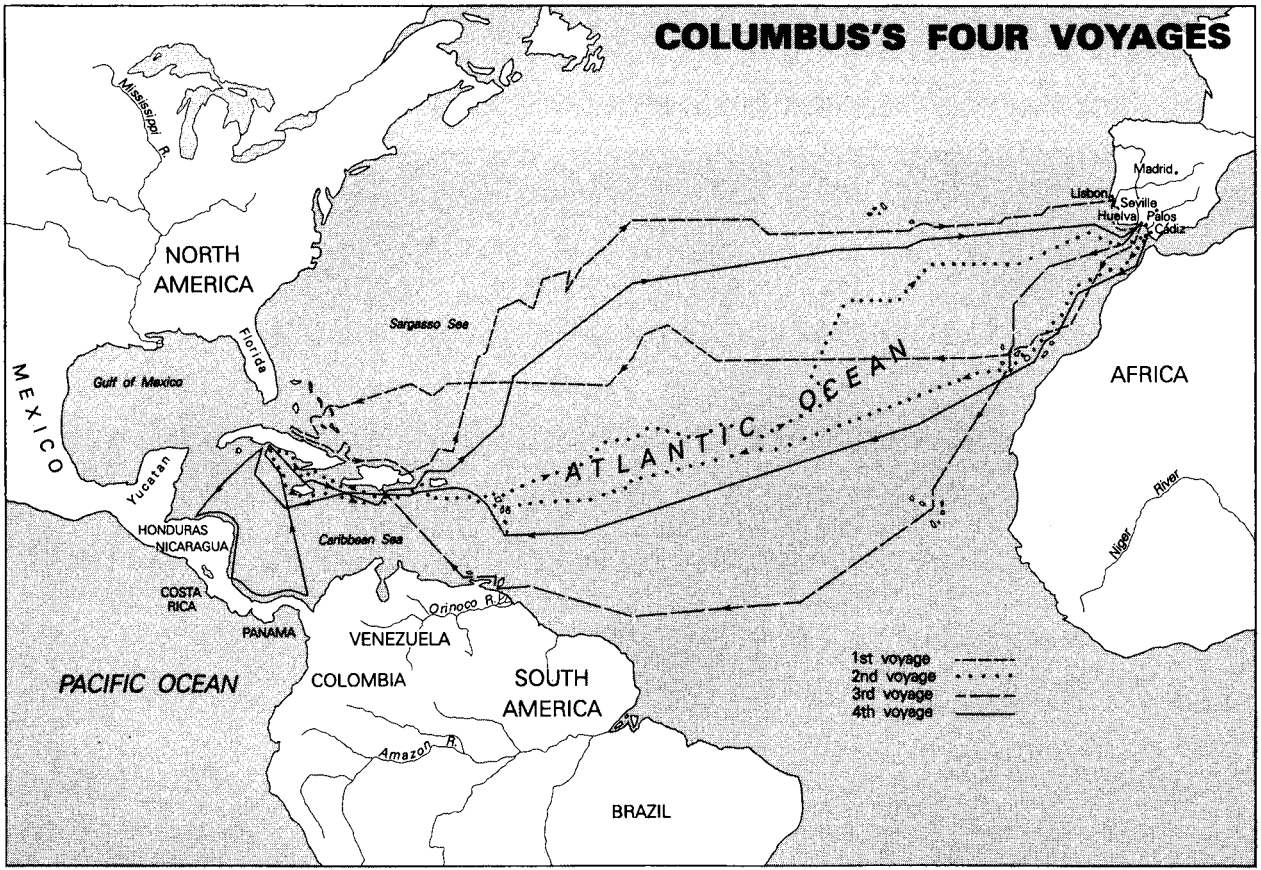
The Worlds of Christopher Columbus

IN THE WORLD of the late twentieth century, events on one continent routinely influence developments on the others, for good or for ill. In the broad expanse of historical time, however, these extensive connections developed quite recently, starting in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In one sense, the process began with Christopher Columbus's four voyages, the first transatlantic excursions to have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. In another sense, however, Columbus's voyages were less a beginning than the continuation of a centuries-old human process of exploration and migration.

When Columbus was born, Europe, Africa, and Asia were each part of the Old World of the Eastern Hemisphere, but they were also separate worlds culturally, religiously, and politically. Over the long span of human history, sea and land routes intermittently connected these worlds, making their peoples at least aware of one another's existence. The world of the Western Hemisphere, on the other hand, stood completely apart and isolated from the Old World, as it had been for thousands of years.

Columbus's voyages shattered that isolation once and for all, in what is arguably the most fateful encounter between disparate human groups that history has ever known. Columbus's voyages, nonetheless, were part of a broader pattern. In just over thirty years, mariners from the Iberian peninsula tied the world together in unprecedented ways. Dozens of voyages figured in this rush to explore, but the most famous were Bartolomeu Dias's rounding of Africa's southern cape in 1488, Columbus's first voyage to the Caribbean in 1492, Vasco da Gama's arrival in India in 1498, and the first circumnavigation of the earth in 1519–22 by Fernão Magalhães (called in English Ferdinand Magellan), a Portuguese sailing for Spain, and Juan Sebastián del Cano, his Spanish Basque second-in-command. Magellan's voyage demonstrated the vast distance that separated Europe and Asia, even as conquest, trade, and settlement were already establishing long-lasting ties between Europe and the Western Hemisphere. The period is so short that it would have been possible for sailors on Dias's or Columbus's voyage to have sailed with Magellan as well. It seems unbelievable that such a momentous change could have occurred in just thirty years, especially considering the thousands of years that advanced civilizations had existed on earth. Yet



Columbus's approximate routes are marked in both directions for the first, second, and fourth voyages. Only his outbound route is marked for the third voyage, because he returned to Spain under arrest, rather than in command of the voyage. (Map prepared by the Cartography Laboratory, Department of Geography, University of Minnesota.)

those thirty years of rapid exploration marked the culmination of centuries of effort by Europeans, especially Italians and Iberians.

Columbus did not set out to discover the lands of the Western Hemisphere at all, even though his unplanned discovery of America is often defined as his most important accomplishment. Instead, Columbus's exploits marked the convergence of two long-term trends in Europe: the search for direct contact with Asia and the gradual mapping of the Atlantic Ocean. Columbus's originality lay in combining these two trends by seeking a western route from Europe to Asia across the ocean. His desire to succeed so consumed him that he never publicly acknowledged what many others suspected before his death: Columbus did not reach Asia at all. Instead, he happened upon a vast and populated area unknown to Europeans. He discovered – or made known – a New World, and within thirty years all of the great urban civilizations on the face of the earth became aware of one another for the first time in human history.

Educated Europeans in Columbus's time marveled at the *"news of such great and unexpected things"* that his voyages revealed, even if they could not be sure just what had been revealed, or where.[1] The next generation had a much clearer notion of the shape of the earth and could glory in Europe's expanding horizons. As the Spanish scholar Juan Luis Vives wrote in 1531, *"the whole globe is opened up to the human race."*[2] The Italian Lazzaro Buonamico wrote in 1539, *"Do not believe that there exists anything more honourable to our or the preceding age than the invention of the printing press and the discovery of the new world; two things which I always thought could be compared, not only to Antiquity, but to immortality."*[3] At the end of the sixteenth century, the Milanese physician Girolamo Cardano reflected on the high points of his life, noting that *"the first and most unusual is that I was born in this century in which the whole world became known; whereas the ancients were familiar with but a little more than a third part of it."*[4] Columbus received his fair share of glory for Europe's good fortune. In 1535, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo praised him as *"the first discoverer and finder of these Indies . . . a brave and wise sailor, and a courageous captain,"* but a man *"still more worthy of fame and glory for having brought the Catholic faith to these parts. . . ."*[5]

COLUMBUS AS HERO

Columbus assumed heroic proportions in the record of world history, partly because of his accomplishments and partly because of the magnitude of the processes he unleashed. The stunning success of his 1492 voyage won fame as soon as he returned to Europe, and

its global implications became apparent by the end of the sixteenth century. Only a heroic individual could be credited with changing the dimensions of the world that Europeans knew in 1492. However, like the heroes of antiquity to whom he was often compared, Columbus was far from perfect as a human being. The sixteenth-century writers who glorified his memory rarely mentioned his flaws, and perhaps were unaware of them. Nonetheless, they expected heroes to display human weaknesses. All the heroes of antiquity and even the ancient pagan gods had flaws. In many classical legends savored by European intellectuals in Columbus's time, the negative aspects of the hero's character could be as instructive as his virtues. Nonetheless, perhaps even then there was less tolerance for failings in real historical heroes than in the legendary heroes of antiquity. And the modern world often seems to have no patience at all with flawed heroes, for reasons that lie more in the realm of psychology than history.

Conflicting notions about heroes and their uses in historical interpretation have clouded many attempts to explain and evaluate the life of Columbus and his place in history. Nowhere has that conflict been more apparent than in the United States. Columbus is one of the most familiar figures in history to Americans – the first European since the Vikings to reach the Western Hemisphere. Americans remember the date 1492 as easily as they remember the date 1776 and rightly assume that Columbus's first voyage was important to the foundation of their country. From the very beginning of the United States as an independent nation, Americans took Columbus, a Genoese merchant mariner sailing for Spain, as one of their national heroes. When the United States expanded westward in the nineteenth century, his reputation rose. Scores of cities, counties, and institutions from east to west were named after Columbus, or his poetic counterpart Columbia, all attesting to the special role that Columbus had assumed in the self-definition of the United States.

Nineteenth-century Americans identified Columbus with the spirit of the frontier, with the heroism of people leaving the security of settled homes to search for a new life. They applauded his invention of bold new ideas and viewed his life as a challenge to outmoded tradition and repressive authority. Americans saw Columbus as a misunderstood genius, far ahead of the scholars of his time. They credited him with scientific learning, a Renaissance man beating against the walls of medieval superstition. They celebrated his life as the triumph of a heroic individual standing alone and unafraid against society's ingrained prejudice. In short, Americans appropriated Columbus as a symbol of everything they admired in themselves as a nation. And in the early twentieth century, Americans of Italian and

Hispanic heritage spearheaded a drive to name a national holiday after Columbus, taking pride in their connection to the famous explorer.

COLUMBUS AS HUMAN BEING

Many aspects of the unblemished portrait of Columbus came directly from his own writings and from those of his closest supporters. Even in the nineteenth century, this one-sided portrayal was contradicted by hard evidence from other sources. Far from being an accomplished scholar or a misunderstood genius, Columbus held wildly inaccurate views of the world. From a limited reading of academic geographers and religious sources, he came to picture an earth reduced in size by one-third, with Japan located at the longitude of the Bahamas. The Columbus that nineteenth-century Americans portrayed as suffering at the hands of hidebound clerics in fact used biblical passages as significant geographical evidence. Deeply influenced by millenarian visionaries, his professed goal was to hasten the conversion of the world to Christianity. As early as his first voyage, he suggested that all profits from his enterprise should be used for the Christian reconquest of Jerusalem from the Muslims. Yet Columbus also had his mind on practical matters. He was an experienced businessman and an inveterate deal-maker, able to attract funding from both public and private sources to support his voyages. And, far from being an individual standing alone against a hostile world, Columbus seems to have been quite sociable, taking comfort from having family and friends close by when he was on land and never sailing from Europe with fewer than ninety others to accompany him. The historic Columbus was much more complex, and certainly much more human, than simple heroic legends portrayed him.

A significant part of that complexity was well understood by scholars even in the early nineteenth century, and persistent research throughout that century unearthed a wealth of additional documentation in Italy and Spain. Nonetheless, the simplified heroic version of Columbus's life and times remained entrenched, especially in the United States. Hundreds of school textbooks based their portrayals of Columbus on the vastly popular biography published by Washington Irving in 1828. Although Irving had access to the best European scholarship on Columbus when he wrote, his main goal was to retell a familiar story in an appealing fashion, not to reinterpret or detract from a man who had become a popular icon in the United States.[6] For the rest of the nineteenth century, variations on Irving's heroic portrait of Columbus continued to hold sway in the United States.

The fourth centenary of Columbus's 1492 voyage became the occasion for the United States to celebrate its new power as a vigorous, expanding nation, and the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, provided a grandiose finale to the festivities. The European commemoration of the fourth centenary included a much more lasting contribution: several published collections of documents dealing with Columbus's life and times, and a flurry of competent scholarship incorporating the information that the documents provided.[7] Scholars in 1892 knew nearly as much about Columbus as we know in 1992, with the exception of a few significant additions unearthed since then. Several Americans contributed to the outpouring of scholarly publications at the end of the nineteenth century, among them Henry Harrisse, John Boyd Thacher, and Justin Winsor.[8]

In Winsor, the heroic version of Columbus's life found its first great American debunker. Other authors had tried to chip away at the solid monument that Irving had erected, but their works had been so tarnished by religious or ethnic prejudice that they were easily dismissed by Columbus's admirers. Winsor could not be dismissed so easily. His careful examination of Columbus's character and accomplishments was based on the documentary record and presented in a spirit of unbiased scholarship. He portrayed Columbus as a daring mariner with great powers of persuasion and extraordinary dedication to his goals. Winsor also revealed Columbus as an inept administrator, so sure of his own rectitude that he openly disobeyed royal instructions and brought many of his troubles on himself. Among his other failings, Columbus unashamedly waged war against the native inhabitants of the Caribbean and enslaved hundreds of them, hoping to profit from a transatlantic slave trade. He angered the Spanish crown by waging war and taking slaves in direct contravention of a royal order, although under appropriate circumstances warfare against the Indians or their enslavement could have been justified by European law and precedent. Nonetheless, the depiction of Columbus as the first slave trader in the New World hardly enhanced his reputation. With Winsor's work, and the accumulated scholarship surrounding the fourth centenary, a more balanced portrayal of Columbus claimed a place beside the heroic portrayal that continued to dominate American historiography.

The irony is that a balanced portrayal of Columbus's character and accomplishments has rarely been presented in the textbooks that have informed generations of schoolchildren.[9] Authors of American textbooks in the nineteenth century were more concerned with presenting Columbus as a role model than with examining his life accurately. In the early twentieth century, much the same attitude prevailed,

but Columbus and the early days of European exploration tended to get shorter shrift as events such as the First World War demanded space in history textbooks. A more critical attitude toward traditional heroes became prominent from the 1930s on, coupled with a trend away from seeing exemplary individuals as the moving forces in history. Writers could feel justified in ignoring individuals altogether and discussing larger forces such as population movements and economic and social trends. The social activism of the 1960s gave rise to an emphasis on certain groups in American society that had been largely ignored in earlier textbooks, especially people of color. Although each of these historical trends stimulated new research and new approaches, they did little to correct the old-fashioned heroic notion of Columbus or to keep alive the nuanced version of his life known in the late nineteenth century. In short, the United States seems to have lost, rather than gained, knowledge about Columbus since 1892. Most people reach adulthood with only the most rudimentary knowledge about him, half-remembered from a few lessons in elementary school.

Many popular misconceptions therefore continue to hold sway in the United States. Some of them are trivial, such as the Columbus Day advertisements that show him peering at the horizon through a telescope, an instrument invented a century after he died. Other misconceptions are more serious, such as the persistent belief that Columbus was the only man of his day to believe in a spherical earth. Taken together, however, these misconceptions reveal a profound lack of knowledge about Columbus and his historical context. Even worse, the general impression seems to be that Columbus is a mysterious figure about whom little is known and much needs to be conjectured. Even serious historians have often filled the gaps in their evidence about Columbus with suppositions about his life and times, as if heroic stories were somehow exempt from the ordinary rules of historical explanation. When serious historians fail to mention that their suppositions have no firm proof, they encourage a wild array of speculation from other authors ignorant of the historical record and the rules of inference.

Scholars have not done a good job of explaining their knowledge about Columbus to a broader public raised on the simplistic notion of Columbus the unblemished hero.[10] Or perhaps there has simply been too much resistance to any attempt to show Columbus as a fully rounded human being, with vices as well as virtues. Not surprisingly, from time to time popular authors and journalists discover the negative aspects of Columbus's life and set out to challenge traditional myths about him.

Some recent debunkers of Columbus approach the evidence with

a sense of triumphant outrage, angered by their assumption that the full story has been hidden from them. They respond like the child in all of us after discovering that trusted adults have withheld part of the truth. Their sense of betrayal is genuine and justified. Unfortunately, their approach often serves a particular political agenda rather than an informed search for truth. For example, an environmentalist might portray Columbus primarily as the first European desecrater of the American environment, assuming that it was pristine before Europeans arrived. Supporters of American Indian causes might pillory Columbus as a genocidal maniac, blaming him by extension for five centuries of perceived injustices. Such furor is counterproductive, not because it tears down the distorted heroic myth of Columbus but because it merely erects other distortions in its place. The attention currently given to supposedly new negative evidence about Columbus's failings raises the possibility that the traditional – and false – heroic myth of Columbus will give way to a revisionist – and equally false – myth of Columbus as villain. If that were to happen, the true figure of Columbus would still be obscured, but this time behind flashy new curtains woven from various strands of current political activism. Such an outcome would be of dubious merit as a lasting legacy of the Columbian Quincentenary.

EVIDENCE AND SUPPOSITION

The difference between persuasive rhetoric and persuasive scholarly argument is the scholar's reliance on hard evidence, and the interpretation and presentation of that evidence in a balanced way. To understand the context and meaning of the Columbian voyage of 1492, we need to discard the misconceptions that have surrounded the historical figure of Columbus. This book is an effort to examine the best evidence available about Columbus and his worlds and to present it as fully, and clearly, as possible. Central to that effort is identifying the evidence and evaluating its validity.

After 1492, when Columbus was a celebrity, his career became fairly well documented, and we can track his movements and actions with some assurance. Before 1492, the situation is far less clear. Part of the problem arises from gaps and the ambiguities in his life history. The early documentary record of his life is obscure and incomplete, to such a degree that amateur historians, often quite ignorant of the fifteenth century, have produced a series of scenarios for his birth and early years. Most are contradictory, and although some are more plausible than others, many of them lack even the most rudi-